97-84047-5

Downer, Charles Alfred

Maurice Maeterlinck

New York

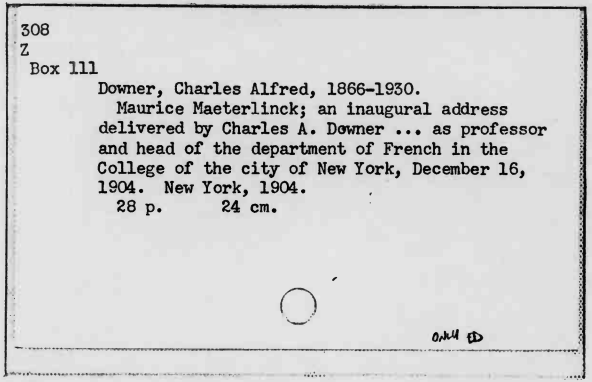
1904

97-84047-5
MASTER NEGATIVE #

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
PRESERVATION DIVISION

BIBLIOGRAPHIC MICROFORM TARGET

ORIGINAL MATERIAL AS FILMED - EXISTING BIBLIOGRAPHIC RECORD


308
Z
Box 111
Downer, Charles Alfred, 1866-1930.
Maurice Maeterlinck; an inaugural address delivered by Charles A. Downer ... as professor and head of the department of French in the College of the city of New York, December 16, 1904. New York, 1904.
28 p. 24 cm.

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: *Reproductions may not be made without permission from Columbia University Libraries.*

TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35mm REDUCTION RATIO: 11:1 IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA (IIA) IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 3-24-97 INITIALS: MS

TRACKING # : 22412

FILMED BY PRESERVATION RESOURCES, BETHLEHEM, PA.

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

BY

CHARLES A. DOWNER, PH. D.

PROFESSOR AND HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH

THE COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

30
Z
B07

MAURICE MAETERLINCK

AN INAUGURAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

CHARLES A. DOWNER, PH. D.

AS

PROFESSOR AND HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT
OF FRENCH IN

THE COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

DECEMBER 16, 1904

NEW YORK CITY

1904

FOREWORD

This lecture was delivered at The College of the City of New York on December 16, 1904. It is not and it could not be a complete presentation of the subject. At most it undertakes to trace the evolution of Maeterlinck's thought as this may be studied in his works. There are some very serious omissions even here, and they were in the main unavoidable. No reference is made to Maeterlinck's religion, or as Brunetière would surely call it, his irreligion. This theme, essential in a complete study of the man, was deemed unessential in this lecture. A further omission is his treatment of the passion of love in the dramas. Dramatic critics and writers of magazine articles all over the world have written of these at length. *Monna Vanna,* the one play of Maeterlinck not permeated with symbolism and mysticism, deserves doubtless a special study. While certainly a very original production, it has much more likeness to the plays current in France of late years than the author's early dramas. The student of Maeterlinck will have to consider, too, whether the deep note of sincerity is not lacking in some of his later essays, whether he is not testing his own virtuosity.

It is the lecturer's opinion that the best essays of Maeterlinck have far greater value than his plays. Probably he never could have become famous but for the discussion excited by these very peculiar dramas. But the thoughtful reader will find his feeling for beauty, his sense of art quite as thoroughly satisfied by the exquisite diction of *La Sagesse et la Destinée* as by the strange and cryptic scenes of the symbolical plays, and he will feel himself at the same time in touch with a genuine wisdom, a deep and well-grounded morality, a fine spirituality. There is a message here, an ethical doctrine that is well worth while, an ideal, an encouragement. Whatever view we adopt as to the necessity of a sanction in the moral life,

we can not gainsay the loftiness of the ideals here set forth. It is this volume, too, that marks the change in Maeterlinck, it is here that he shows that the pessimist is only apparently a deeper thinker than the optimist.

"Ne nous laissons pas tromper par des apparences. Hamlet qui se lamente au bord du gouffre, nous semble plus profond et plus passionnant qu'Antonin le Pieux, qui regarde tranquillement les mêmes forces, les accepte et les interroge avec calme, au lieu de les maudire et d'y chercher des sujets d'épouvante. Tout ce qu'on fait durant le jour, parait moins auguste que le moindre geste qu'on ébauche alors que la nuit tombe, mais l'homme est né pour travailler pendant le jour, et non pas pour s'agiter dans les ténèbres."

One more quotation from the same volume will show the direction Maeterlinck's thought takes in the problem of duty and in the relation of ethics to religion and especially to the Christian religion. He is speaking of sacrifice, considered by many the supreme virtue. "Non, la vertu suprême est de savoir que faire, et d'apprendre à choisir à quoi l'on peut donner sa vie. Ce n'est que provisoirement que le devoir pour chacun de nous est ce qu'il croit être son devoir. Le premier de nos devoirs est d'éclairer notre idée du devoir. Le mot *devoir* contient souvent bien plus d'erreurs et de nonchalance morale qu'il ne renferme de vertus. Clytemnestre dévoue sa vie à venger sur Agamemnon la mort d'Iphigénie, et Oreste sacrifie la sienne à venger sur Clytemnestre la mort d'Agamemnon. Mais il a suffi qu'un sage passât en disant: "Pardonnez à vos ennemis," pour que tous les devoirs de la vengeance fussent effacés de la conscience humaine. Il suffira peut-être qu'un autre sage passe un jour, pour que la plupart des devoirs du sacrifice en soient également bannis. En attendant, certaines idées sur le renoncement, la résignation et le sacrifice, épuisent plus profondément que de grands vices et que des crimes même, les plus belles forces morales de l' humanité."

And lastly the lecturer avows the omission of biographical details.

In spite of the magnificent production of Sainte-Beuve one may still believe that individual genius remains unexplained after all these searchings into influences. Other Belgians may read English authors, keep bees, marry French actresses, travel in Southern Europe, take up their residence in Paris, but they will not be Maeterlinck. All these things are important certainly, and their influence not difficult to demonstrate in the present case as in most others. But the mystery of the individuality remains after all. What is important and often forgotten is, that it is the art and the work of the artist with which we are concerned.

MAURICE MAETERLINCK.

At the moment when President Finley honored me with a request to deliver an address in the College to mark my accession to larger responsibilities, I was engaged in the study of Maurice Maeterlinck and had just finished reading his last book, *Le Double Jardin.* My interest in the Belgian poet and thinker was first aroused by *La Vie des Abeilles,* a work whose depth and beauty seem to grow for me with each fresh reading. It is rash to use a superlative concerning a book that has not been put to the test of time, or to use a comparative in an age when it is impossible to know even a small portion of the noteworthy books that invite the student's attention. One may safely assert, however, that this is one of the great books of our generation. And if all Maeterlinck's work were of this kind, I should not have hesitated as I did in making him the subject of this brief study.

For it is easy to imagine that a few years ago a number of objections might have been raised had it been proposed to present the work of Maurice Maeterlinck to a body of young men. Those acquainted with his plays might very pertinently have inquired whether it is proper to offer to the youth a study of the writings of an avowed pessimist, brooding ceaselessly and monotonously upon the mystery of human life. It is to be feared that his first volume of verse, *Serres Chaudes,* may be characterized not unjustly as a series of unintelligible enigmas, literally lacking in rhyme and reason. Some might doubt even to-day whether he is to be classed as a French author, this Belgian, whose matter and whose manner lie quite outside the sound French tradition, and in whose earlier writings may be traced upon every page influences which are anything but French. Maeterlinck's whole thought is colored by his readings in the mystics of mediæval times and in such moderns as the Ger-

man Novalis and the American Emerson. His later views of life are manifestly influenced by the study of English thinkers. It is reasonable that the student of French literature should confine his attention to what is typically and essentially French, leaving out of consideration what is exceptional or eccentric. But in this last generation the tendencies of French literature are so contradictory, so diverse, that it is no longer easy to distinguish between a general type and divergence therefrom.

Until within a few years some of these objections would certainly have been well founded. Maeterlinck's message was not a message to recommend to the young. Completely absorbed in the fundamental mysteries of human existence, oppressed with a haunting sense of the unknowable that envelops our life on all sides, he wrote a series of plays, wherein he sought to stir the emotions of his readers or spectators by the sight of human creatures swept on to disaster, helpless victims of a relentless, incomprehensible fatality, ever in the shadow of Death, anguished by the inscrutable enigmas of their own souls and destinies. These dramas are full of gloom, and their meaning perhaps obscured by the symbolism for which their author showed a marked and constant predilection in these earlier days.

Whether we approve or disapprove of such a purpose in art, we can scarcely deny to these plays the merit of originality, except possibly in one or two cases, and their success and fame are to be attributed to their undoubted poetic power. Certain English critics have heaped ridicule upon them because Octave Mirbeau was ill-advised enough to apply to his friend the appellation of the Belgian Shakespeare. No characterization could be wider of the mark, in spite of the obvious imitation of Shakespearean horrors in *La Princesse Maleine*, or the mystery and poetic fancy to be found in some of the other plays. Mystery and poetic fancy abound in Shakespeare, but he is pre-eminently a great realist, whereas Maeterlinck in the plays that precede *Monna Vanna* has not aimed at creating strongly differentiated individuals or types, has not held the mirror up to nature, but rather has sought exclusively to present with great intensity one or two modes of interpreting human life. The plays merely symbolize certain peculiar and arbitrary conceptions of their author. With a kind of half-humor he himself has called some of them plays for marionettes.

As in the case of any art that seeks to express what requires for its appreciation a higher measure than mere common sense, it is not difficult to find a subject for ridicule in these dramas. But they are not to be dismissed summarily. Several of them constitute possibly the most successful attempt that has yet been made to create a static theatre, to evoke the deepest sense of life with a minimum of action. Ordinarily we conceive of the stage as a place of action, it is the commonly accepted dictum that the stage lives by action. We expect the clash of one human will against another, a conflict between desire and duty, translated into eloquent discourse and expressive gesture. But it is well known that when we feel most we are often silent, and that our most intense experiences often bear little relation to external circumstances. As Maeterlinck expresses it, "A good painter now-a-days no longer depicts Marius conquering the Cimbri, or the assassination of the Duc de Guise, because the psychology of victory or murder is elementary and exceptional, because the useless din of violence stifles the deeper, inner voice of beings and of things." "Our tragic authors and our mediocre painters who still cling to historical painting place the main interest of their work in the violence of the anecdote they represent, and they expect to entertain us with the same sort of deeds that delighted the barbarians who habitually committed such acts of treachery and bloodshed. Whereas, our lives for the most part know naught of murder and screams and swords; human tears have become silent, invisible and almost spiritual.

"I admire Othello, but he does not appear to me to live the august

daily life of Hamlet, who has time to live because he does not act. Othello's jealousy is admirable. But is it not perhaps an antiquated error to believe that we live when these terrible passions possess us? I have sometimes thought that an old man, seated in his arm-chair, merely waiting under the lamp-light, listening without knowing it, to all the eternal laws that reign about his dwelling, interpreting without understanding it, what there is in the silence of doors and windows, in the small voice of the light, passive in the presence of his soul and his destiny, with his head slightly bowed, unaware that all the powers of this world take part in watching over the room like careful servants, not knowing that the sun itself upholds the little table on which he leans, that there is not a star in the sky nor a force of the soul that is unrelated to the falling of an eyelid or the rising of a thought;—I have sometimes thought that this motionless old man lives really a deeper life, a life more broadly human than the lover strangling his mistress, the general winning a victory, or the husband avenging his honor."

Such is the theory. The appeal is to our most intimate emotions by the quietest possible means. There seems to be no objection to this mode of treating the theatre, if the intention is realized in the execution, but the question whether the kind of emotion Maeterlinck chose to awaken in these plays is wholesome, profitable, uplifting, is quite a different one. He himself has answered the question in the negative, and it is this remarkable fact that has determined me in my choice of subject for to-day. There is a lesson of courage in this frank disavowal of his earlier work; and his subsequent production is a notable example of repentance and of amendment; and it is well that so remarkable a thinker, so great an artist should furnish us with new weapons to combat morbid pessimism. Maeterlinck has veered about completely. Without loss of depth or power he has come forth from his haunts of twilight and shadows into the bracing air of the life of the world. He has shown the immense gain

to be acquired in the practical and sympathetic study of nature as it lies about us. The sense of the mystery of things is ever with him, dominating all his thought, but instead of exerting a benumbing, paralyzing effect, it leads him to devote his splendid gifts to the great problem that lies before us all, how best to live.

I have not time to analyze these earlier plays, wherein love and death control hapless, suffering beings and plunge them into final disaster. In *Les Aveugles,* humanity is symbolized under the guise of a company of blind persons who have wandered forth into the country led by an old priest. He has died upon the way and lies stark and cold in their midst, while they sit in growing wonder and terror, listening to strange, unexplainable sounds. The symbolism is not difficult to penetrate.

Death is there in all its horror; there are the abysmal uncertainties that beset human life; there is the agony of doubt of the soul that has rejected revelation and the guidance of authority. There is the bankruptcy of science, which has merely deepened and broadened or at best displaced the mystery of the world. In *L'Intruse* the action upon the stage is of the simplest. We see a family of six persons gathered together in a room from which is obtained a view of a garden. The grandfather is old and blind, strangely nervous and susceptible to uncanny impressions. The conversation apprises us of the presence of a new-born babe, of a mother whose life is in danger. We do not see them, they are in separate rooms nearby. The blind old man is full of fear and trembling, every sound he hears calls out a question. He believes that death enters the house as a person invisible, but real. In the Latin family of languages death is feminine. She is *l'Intruse.* She it is whose presence hushes the nightingales in the garden, and causes the fish in the fountain to dart beneath the surface of the moon-lit water. In spite of our sober sense the feeling creeps over us that the old man is right, his hallucination gets hold of us. A stranger is felt to be in the room,

seated among the members of the family. Toward the hour of midnight the old man hears her rise from her chair, he fancies that she treads silently toward the sick-room. His unreasoning terror is communicated to all. Just then the Sister of Charity, who has been watching at the bedside of the sleeping woman, appears in the doorway. No word is spoken, but it is evident that the visitation has come upon that house. The play might have been called the unseen presence. Human helplessness in the face of sickness and death is the theme, but we see no sick-bed, nor any simulation of death. Man is the victim of the unseen.

Perhaps the best of the plays that have Death for their theme is the one called *Intérieur*. It is not marred by certain mannerisms which Maeterlinck affects in some of the others, and it does not depend for its effect upon superstitious fear, or upon any admission of the supernatural, but comes home to our common humanity with a touching, tender power. It consists of a single scene. We are in an old garden, before us at the back of the stage is a house, wherein one room of the lower floor is lighted up. Here a family are gathered about the lamp, a sweet picture of peaceful, home life. An old man, a friend of the persons before us, arrives accompanied by one who is designated merely as the stranger. They bring tidings of death, and stand a while in the shadow of the great dark trees watching the family, who sit unconscious of the loss that has come. How shall they best break the news? As their colloquy proceeds the quiet tone of sadness sounded at the beginning grows in solemnity and depth. The sister of the two fair girls within has been drowned only an hour before and a troop of villagers are bringing back the body on its bier of broken boughs. How shall they break the news? Their courage grows weaker; they have not the heart to turn this peace and beauty into woe and weeping. It had seemed easy enough. They had expected to enter, to say a few words leading up to the truth, but it is not so simple. The old man's granddaughter brings

word that the procession has started for the house. She is surprised that the news is not yet broken. She, too, watches with them, and says at last, "Grandfather, do not tell them to-night". The old man's reply contains the expression of Maeterlinck's feeling as to life and death.

"You see, you are losing courage, too. I knew we were wrong to look in upon them. I am nearly eighty-three, and this is the first time that the sight of life has struck my vision. I do not know why all they do seems so strange and solemn. They are waiting for night, simply, about their lamp, as we should have been doing about ours; and yet I seem to look down upon them from another world, because I know one little truth that they do not know yet. Is not that the reason, my children? Tell me why you are so pale, too. Is there, perhaps, something else that cannot be said that makes us weep? I did not know that there was anything so sad in life or that life could fill you with fear if you looked at it thus. And though nothing had happened, I should have felt afraid, seeing them so tranquil. They have too much trust in this world. There they sit, a few poor windows between them and the enemy. They think nothing will happen to them, because they have closed the door, and they fail to see that something is always happening within our souls, and that the world is not bounded by the doors of houses. They are so sure of their little life, and they do not suspect that so many others know more than they; that I, poor old man, hold here, at their very threshold, all their little happiness in these old hands, that I dare not open."

The company of mourners arrive, the news has to be broken. Death comes like a stroke from out the dark, to rend the hearts of those that had forgotten the awful possibility.

We may make a generalization in regard to all these earlier plays of Maeterlinck, the love-dramas as well as these death-dramas, that the life, the soul of human beings is conceived as subject to

an external fatality; a passion comes into the soul, as death comes into our life, we know not whence or why, and brings anguish and disaster. This view of life reduces it to a kind of dreadful puppet-show, where the poor little figures can feel the pain inflicted, and are tortured from within and without, where all struggle is ultimately useless, and where there is no answer to the everlasting why.

These earlier plays of Maeterlinck were published between 1890 and 1896. They were followed by three volumes of essays, *Le Trésor des Humbles, La Sagesse et la Destinée* and *Le Temple Enseveli.* Maeterlinck also translated from the Flemish the *Ornament of the Spiritual Wedding* of Ruysbroeck the Admirable, and from the German *The Disciples at Saïs,* and the *Fragments* of Novalis.

Just here we are in the most difficult part of our subject, for by definition the doctrines of mysticism are not to be apprehended by the reason or the intelligence, and all mystics agree that it is impossible to speak clearly of these things. Behind and beneath what we ordinarily mean by life, there lies a deeper inner life of the soul, where there is another reality than that of the senses and of the understanding, where knowledge comes through direct revelation, through intuition, through ecstatic vision of the divine. The fact that most men do not have these experiences can not justify us in rejecting their reality for those who do, but the mystic has always been an exception among men. Says Emerson, "There are not in the world at any one time more than a dozen persons who read and understand Plato:—never enough to pay for an edition of his works; yet to every generation these come duly down." Maeterlinck has stored his mind with the writings of the mystics; Plato and Plotinus, Saint Denys the Areopagite, Ruysbroeck the Admirable, Novalis, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jacob Boehme, Swedenborg, Emerson, Carlyle. He grows more and more concerned with moral and religious problems. He begins to make allusions to the teachings of

Jesus, to the life of Marcus Aurelius. Among these influences that of Emerson seems to be the strongest. The very title of *Le Trésor des Humbles,* the tone of all the essays that make up the volume seems inspired by the sage of Concord. In spite of its abstruseness it is beautiful reading. After all is the doctrine so difficult to grasp? Does it mean more than this; that we possess a soul dwelling in an inner sanctuary, which soul is our real self? Do we not live side by side for years with other human beings whom we never know as they are, but of whom even when we think our knowledge of them most intimate, we have beheld only the exterior things, the gestures, the word, the glance, the manifestation of passion or emotion? Is not a kindred soul revealed to us now and then in an utterly mysterious way, not through the medium of speech, but through the medium of silence? Is it not this inner soul which is made known to us in those rare moments of our experience when we become filled with an overwhelming sense of the sublimity of the universe, as sometimes on a cloudless night, we stand upon an elevated point, beneath the vast expanse of sky, in silence, our whole nature strangely awake, strangely thrilled, lifted far above our ordinary selves, in a kind of ecstasy? Is it not to this inner soul that the greatest music speaks?

And the majesty of the soul is a fearful thing. Does it not explain the dread of silence found among men? Maeterlinck has an essay on *Silence,* and he feels as do Carlyle and Emerson. He says: "We endure, it may be confessed, the silence of being alone, our own silence; but the silence of several, the silence of many, especially the silence of a great crowd, is a supernatural burden of which the stoutest souls dread the inexplicable weight. We use up a goodly part of our lives in seeking places where silence does not reign. No sooner do two or three men meet than they seek to banish the invisible enemy, for how many ordinary friendships have no other basis than the horror of silence?" And elsewhere, "If I speak to you of

the gravest matters, of love, of death, or of destiny, I do not get at love, death or destiny, and despite my efforts there will always remain between us a truth unsaid, which we had no idea of saying, and yet this truth that has not been voiced will alone have lived a moment between us, and we have been unable to think of anything else. This truth is *our truth* concerning death, destiny or love, and we have caught a glimpse of it only in silence."

And Maeterlinck has an essay on the soul's awakening, wherein there is a striking passage, one that is especially interesting to the student of French literature. He has been speaking of the spiritual history of the world, of periods in the past when the spiritual consciousness of men seemed to be aroused more than at other times. Maeterlinck believes that such a period has come again. He says, in regard to the past, "On the other hand, there are ages of perfection, wherein intelligence and beauty reign with great purity, but wherein the soul does not come to light. Thus, it lies far away from Greece and Rome, from the 17th and 18th centuries in France.—We can not say why, but there is something missing; secret communications are cut off, and beauty closes our eyes. It is very difficult to express this in words, and to state why the atmosphere of divinity and fatality surrounding the dramas of the Greeks does not seem to be the veritable atmosphere of the soul. We discover upon the horizon of these dramas a mystery which is permanent and venerable; but it is not the tender, kindly, deeply active mystery that we find in many a work less great and beautiful. And closer to us here is Racine, the infallible poet of the heart of woman. But who would dare assert that he ever advanced one step toward her soul? What will you answer me if I question you as to the soul of *Andromaque* or *Britannicus?* The characters of Racine are to be understood only through what they express. They can not cease to speak or they would cease to be. They have no invisible principle, and one would think that some insulating substance had been interposed between

their spirit and themselves, between the life that is in touch with all that exists and the life that touches only a passing moment given up to a passion, a pain, a desire. There are periods truly when the soul sinks into sleep, and no one is concerned about it." To which René Doumic replies "That which the mystic poet imputes to them as a fault is just what we admire in them, to see they know themselves so well, preserving in the very paroxysms of passion such a startling lucidity of mind." It is quite probable that Maeterlinck points out here one fundamental difference between Shakespeare and Racine.

Maeterlinck has not anywhere expressly stated what caused him to turn from his gloomy brooding over the misery of human condition, nor has he indicated the precise moment when the change came over him. But if we are to glean the information from his published works, it would appear that it was the study of Emerson, which, more than any other external cause, inspired him with fresh courage and a cheerful view of the world. Emerson felt the value of the humblest existences. He it was "who came to several at a moment when they were in mortal need of new explanations and of new light." We must all live our little daily lives, but we need to possess the sense of their worth, of the dignity, the greatness of life. With Emerson, Maeterlinck finds life strange enough, profound enough, great enough to require no end beyond itself. Emerson may know no more than other men, but his affirmations are made with courage. He is trustful in the midst of mystery. He shows us that all the forces of heaven and earth sustain us. He is the sage of our ordinary daily life, he teaches us to venerate the little hours. For Maeterlinck, as for Emerson, the violent, exceptional moments of existence are of less interest than existence itself. "A poet adds to ordinary life an indefinable something that is the secret of poets, and life is seen in wondrous glory, in its boundless relations, in its awful woe."

But the change is not suddenly made, nor has Maeterlinck ever wholly shaken off his early melancholy. The question of fatality still fascinates and holds him. He is learned in superstition. He knows of the Scotch use of the word *fey* applied to one swept on irresistibly to disaster. He refers to the almost universal superstition according to which it is sufficient to believe ourselves safe from harm to call the thunderbolt down upon our head; or another belief that there are among our fellow-men some that protect us, and others that bring us evil. Shall we say that whatever smacks of superstition or of the supernatural is unworthy in these modern times of a serious thinker? That would be going too far, perhaps. Maeterlinck is profoundly interested in these things, and has written essays bearing such titles as *Le Passé, La Chance, L'Avenir.* After all, there is mystery everywhere, and all men who endeavor to get at what lies behind phenomena, who seek to interpret their observations and their study of facts, must rise to the sense of mystery. We feel the need of a general conception of this world, and by this we mean in reality a conception of the unknown, but we may not choose the one that seems to us just now the noblest and grandest, but we must seek the truth, convinced that final truth will be equal to or greater than our loftiest imaginings. We must choose of two apparent truths the one that seems truer than the other. Now it is apparently true that we live for a moment in this boundless universe, and we seem to have no mission beyond the propagation of a species that has no certain mission. But Maeterlinck, the erstwhile poet of death and gloom, now believes that the poet has a thousand other duties besides the proclamation of this truth, and even if our planet be but a miserable accident in the history of worlds, its life and our life are of the utmost importance to us. What is essential is to cling not to the truth which may be truest in the universal sense, but to the one which is truest from the human point of view.

In our daily lives and thoughts we are prone to seek in some form of the idea of fatality an explanation of what is in the last analysis unexplainable. The idea of fatality is still the mainspring of the tragic creations of the poet and dramatist. We shall not soon outgrow our feeling for the august and solemn grandeur of the decrees of fate. Man would fain believe himself free but sometimes there appears to be a greater satisfaction in the belief that he is not free. If his vanity is gratified in the conception of freedom, there is a compensation in the conception of a great power ever working upon him and through him, ever concerned with him. In the poet's creations some infinite, irresistible force must lend dignity to the adventures or they sink to commonplace vulgarity. Without the curse of predestination, without the heroic struggle with an occult justice Macbeth becomes an odious assassin. The hatred of Venus raises Phèdre into the realm of poetry. Wagner's Tristan and Isolde rise to heroic heights of sorrow through the love-philtre, the symbol of the inevitable, compelling power of an inner fatality. More recently Ibsen has given the world a powerful and awful tragedy in the play *Ghosts,* putting a modern notion of heredity in the place of the ancient fatality more dreadful than the ancient idea, because utterly devoid of justice, because of a pretense of strictly scientific explanation, which, if true, leaves us cold with horror.

But these problems have other aspects, and grave though they be, they are not always so tragic. It *is* true that each one of us is the product of heredity, and stands, so to say, at the apex of a countless mass of converging lines, controlled therefore in great measure by the dead. It appears no less manifest that our whole life is organized for us in view of future generations. In one very special sense, at least, the dead do not die, they live on in us. And this consideration magnifies tremendously the importance of any-one of us, not only the importance of our life as a whole, but of any single act we commit. It is fraught with incalculable consequences.

This is like the Emersonian idea of the importance of little things. The sage does not need to be shocked into a sense of the depth of life. For Wordsworth the meanest flower that grows awakened thoughts that lie too deep for tears. Beauty and greatness lie everywhere about us. Most of us know this, but do not know it effectively. We are aware of the infinity of the interstellar spaces, but we forget them. As for the riddle of the universe, while we are waiting for the answer we must live, and we shall live most potently if we strive to live happily and nobly. We must keep up our courage and cultivate our clearness of vision in an untiring search for truth. Maeterlinck would have us live as though we were ever on the verge of a great discovery, ever ready to receive it with ardor, with enthusiasm, ever hoping that the truth revealed will be great, lofty, perfect and ennobling beyond our highest conception, so that if ever the truth of the universe shall be made known to us, the wonder of it shall flow into our souls in a deeper and broader stream according to the depth and breadth of the channel our expectation shall have shaped for it.

In these later volumes Maeterlinck expresses his thought with great beauty in the use of words. Mere charm of language is rather lacking in the earlier plays, but in the essays, especially in *La Sagesse et la Destinée* the style is maintained at a great height. The sentences are longer than in most modern writers of French and have possibly a certain deliberate, languorous movement. But though they have little flash or sparkle, the mind is warmed and illumined with their steady glow, and the musical sense is delighted when they are read aloud. The entire volume of *La Vie des Abeilles* is a masterpiece of poetic prose. The play *Monna Vanna* belongs in an altogether different category from the earlier plays, both in matter and in form. In this play, for the first time, Maeterlinck creates real men, and a real woman, as we commonly understand those terms. But the persons in the drama speak the flowing, peculiarly

sustained prose of their author, a sort of broad *cantabile*, always *legato*, usually *andante*. *Joyzelle*, the last play, is an experiment in rhythmic prose. The choice of subject marks a return to the unreal and legendary, to symbolism and to a probing of the inner soul. The form of language our author has adopted in this play is, I believe, quite new in French. The prose is marked off by the cæsuras of the French Alexandrine verse, with certain liberties in counting the e mute, and with no rhyme or assonance. The effect is disconcerting. This peculiar, artificial structure, this hybrid poetic form, thrusts itself too much upon the attention. It is difficult to read *Joyzelle* without scanning it. The experiment can hardly be called successful.

For those who love language for its own sake, who can feel the witchery of well-chosen words, who are sensitive to the music of fine cadences and varied rhythms, the prose of this master of the French tongue will undoubtedly give great pleasure. He who once rather disdained mere verbal beauty has shown himself an artist in language, and has had the ability to write of the most abstruse and recondite searchings of the human heart and mind in the exquisitely precise and lucid speech of France, a land where there have been no literary mystics of any moment.

And as is fitting the beauty of the form has grown with the nobility of the thought. Maeterlinck's last books are the best, and if so considerable a portion of this brief study has been devoted to his earlier work, it is because his fame was made by his mystical dramas and his mystical doctrines, because the high seriousness of his present moral teaching is best understood when we know the depth of pessimism from which he has risen. Several of his early critics found his outlook upon life singularly narrow. One of them ventured to assert that he has no interest in external nature, apparently no knowledge of rocks and trees, of birds and beasts. The poor critic is often short in his reckoning. For now we can only be

astonished at the wealth of knowledge that lies beneath the later essays. Maeterlinck is a scholar, he has the learning of the man of the closet. But he has besides the knowledge that comes of the practical study of nature.

His book on the bees evinces not only a full and perfect knowledge of the literature of the subject, but he has watched and tended his bees for years. His essay called *Fleurs démodées* is a tour de force in botany. Yet the book on the bees and the essay on the poor little neglected field flowers could never have been written by a mere entomologist or a mere botanist. The later volumes show again that he is a man of his time, keenly interested in the religious, social, moral and political problems that are stirring men's thoughts in this generation. This is nowhere more apparent than in the admirable essay upon *Justice*, wherein not only the oft forgotten distinctions between the physical and the moral world are finely drawn, but wherein also such concrete questions of human justice are discussed, as the Dreyfus affair, the war in the Transvaal, the three great iniquities of Napoleon, namely the assassination of the duc d'Enghien, the trick played upon the Bourbons at Bayonne, and the Russian campaign, and the general injustice of human poverty, which we are too fond of imputing to the blind forces of the physical world, not remembering that the injustice of our social condition is merely the total of human injustices. He says with great feeling: "Is it reasonable to wonder that the ocean takes no account of the state of the soul of its victim, when we, who have a soul, the organ *par excellence* of justice, take no account of the innocence of thousands of wretched people who are *our* victims? Are we excused when we remove far from our daily concerns a force that lies entirely within our hands and call it a fatal force? Verily we are strange judges and strange lovers of ideal justice! We shudder from one end of the world to the other at a judicial error, but the error which condemns to poverty three-quarters of our brethren, and which is as purely human as

the error of a court of justice, we attribute to some inaccessible, implacable power. * * * Before complaining of the indifference of Nature and seeking in Nature an equity not to be found there, it would be wise to attack, within our human realm, an iniquity which *is* there, and when it shall have been extirpated, then the share of injustice to be imputed to blind chance will probably appear diminished by two-thirds."

So far has Maeterlinck traveled from his earlier position of the overwhelming power of fate, and so earnestly has he come to believe in the power of human action to achieve human ends! Perfectly familiar with Darwinism and all the doctrines derived therefrom, he is not one of those who believe that the struggle for life, the survival of the fittest, natural selection and what not, are to be invoked as principles to place might above right in our human relations. Granting that nature takes no account of our intentions, good or bad, we may not conclude that nature is void of all morality and equity. That would be tantamount to a statement that there are no secrets or mysteries left and that we know the laws, the origin and the end of the universe. Though force reign in the universe, equity ought none the less to reign in our hearts. "If the whole race is irresistibly, justly unjust, if the mass seems to have rights that the single individual does not possess, * * * * * the duty of each individual in the mass is to remain just in the center of all the conscience he succeeds in combining and maintaining in himself."

But isolated quotations are very unjust to Maeterlinck. His years of study in mysticism have not impaired his lucidity of mind or his logical faculty in dealing with our actual and immediate problems, and he has really a great stimulating power. His essays must be read entire. As an instance of the power of suggestion we may cite in the essay on *Justice* an unexpected mention of the Arabian Nights. At first we may fail to see the à propos. Why the Arabian Nights in an essay on *Justice?* But in these tales of the

sultana Scheherazade there is presented a marvelous civilization, wherein the moral aspects of life are by no means ignored. The most delicate ideas of justice, the most penetrating precepts of wisdom are formulated therein. Men know the virtue of compassion and weep over the woes of others. But one revolting, monstrous injustice remains utterly unperceived. There is no allusion to it. Human slavery, and especially the slavery of women, is not felt as a wrong even by its victims. Hence by analogy we may fear the possibility of being ourselves blind to some actual wrong, and we may be sure there are moral truths yet to be learned and developed.

And now we come to the book on the bee, wherein a whole little world of wonder and beauty stands revealed, redolent with the odors of glorious summer days and glowing with the splendors of clear summer skies; a little world of mystery and tragedy, too, where love and destiny and death play their part as they do in human life, and where the unknowable spreads its impenetrable veil at every turn. The old-fashioned method of didactic criticism which points out the beauties of great writers has had its day. We are shy of those who admire too much; and so I dare not give a free rein to the enthusiasm I feel over this little volume, wherein science and poetry are so harmoniously blended. The book is not a treatise on apiculture, yet you may learn from it all that is known about the bee; it is the work of a poet but the bounds of truth are not exceeded. Maeterlinck does not paint the lily or gild refined gold. For him no wonders are greater than the purest truth, and man's highest effort is the effort after truth. For twenty years and more this thoughtful man has studied the bees, and if he has added no great fact about them to our knowledge, he has been led to a vast number of reflections and has found a theme on which to build a symphony of beautiful thoughts. The volume possesses the fine French quality of well-ordered composition, it is like a noble symmetrical building, and we

are led from room to room, easily grasping the plan of the whole, and accumulating in our memories a series of indelible pictures.

The unifying principle that underlies all the activities of a hive of bees Maeterlinck denotes by the term "the spirit of the hive," finding here something different from instinct, something deeper than mechanically acquired habit, in some of its manifestations diametrically opposed to the instinct of self-preservation, and in its dictate to sacrifice the present for the future possibly passing beyond the limits of human morality. It is this "spirit of the hive" and not the will of the queen that determines all the events in the history of the hive. It is the love of the race of to-day for the race of to-morrow. In our attempts to find a standard to measure the strength and moral greatness of a people we find nothing better than the persistence of an ideal they pursue and their devotion to it. This principle is not always easy to find in human history. But the ideal of the bee seems very evidently to be an entire devotion to the future. The hive is abandoned, and the risk of a journey to unknown lands is undertaken, not when life has become unendurable in the old home, not under stress of pain and poverty, but at the high tide of prosperity, when the storehouses are filled to bursting, when all is joy and happiness.

And Maeterlinck leads us from fact to fact in the life of the bee, from wonder to wonder, from mystery to mystery. Buffon, in whom this sense of the marvelous was not developed as in Maeterlinck, thought it sufficient in accounting for the life of the bees, to consider that ten thousand individuals forced to live together, though they begin by harming one another, must come to harm one another as little as possible and finally to help one another, and apparently to work together for a common end, and he derived their apparent faculty for architecture, order, foresight, love of the hive, and so on, from a mere mechanical principle. This is asking a great deal of a mere mechanical principle. Perhaps the old naturalist would explain

human society as simply. But let us believe with Maeterlinck that if it is imprudent to admire the bees, we shall then have to admire nature, for the wonder is ever there. And all these pages of lucid explanations and fascinating details are interspersed with exquisite poetic passages, like all poetry impossible of adequate translation. Virgil amid his delightful errors concerning the bees has not reached a finer beauty of expression.

And on the last pages of his volume, the poet bids us never to allow the thought of a general destruction to enter in upon our thoughts. This is from the pen of the author of *L'Intruse* and *Intérieur*. The bees have been subjected to an amazing interference from without; they are given over to an outside power that can destroy them, or modify their race and its destinies. But they follow their deep and original duty none the less.

And how shall we know what is the supreme duty of a being? It is written in the organ that distinguishes it, and to which all the others are subordinate; and as the organs of the bee are formed for the production of honey, so it is written in our eyes and ears, in the lobes of our head and in the nervous system of our bodies, that we are created to transform what we absorb from earth into a special energy, unique in kind on this globe. The strange fluid we call thought, intelligence, understanding, reason, soul, virtue, goodness, justice—it has countless names but one essence. We know not whither it leads us, what it will make of us. The bee knows not who will have the honey they store up. We know not who will profit by the spiritual power we store up in the world. And so for Maeterlinck the lesson of the bee is to live the higher life, to develop our highest faculties, to build a social order that shall develop us all. The lesson, of course, is based upon a mere analogy, but it is no less forceful and inspiring for that.

What profit then shall a man have to reward him for a study of Maeterlinck? Is he likely to be any better or wiser, or to have ex-

perienced any ennobling pleasure? It may be safely affirmed that to follow the evolution of this man's thought is to make a journey through the regions of human thought that are the most impressive and the most inspiring, for they are the regions of the religions, the philosophies and the sciences. It is not a journey for amusement, it is not trifling or dawdling on a pleasure tour, there are few incidents to provoke a smile. But it is a steady ascent, not over-arduous, rather with much of the exultation that comes from rising constantly to higher elevations, broader vistas, larger expanses of sky, fuller floods of sunlight, and when we reach the temple that crowns the serene heights to which our guide has led us, we fill our lungs with the invigorating air of the uplands, where health and strength, hope and life are renewed.

Maeterlinck is not wholly inconsistent in this evolution or transformation. His present optimism is of the grave and serious sort, the deeper and stronger because it has been acquired, and is not the result either of a naturally buoyant or superficial temperament. This son of Flanders, where, we are told, men often take a gloomy view of life, has seen the Mediterranean, has made his home among a gayer people, and these external influences may have helped to change him. But the change seems chiefly due to his own reflection and study, to the winning of a broader outlook. It may be not unreasonable to despair of the destiny of man. But, as he says, it is a great thing that we have a choice between the two views, and that until now, nothing has been decided against us. The world has never known a civilization to be compared with that of to-day, either in regard to achievement or extent. We have motives to strive for great things that our predecessors never knew. We have lost many beliefs they held which were often rather discouraging of effort, than encouraging. They certainly have brought about the present, with all the wonders that it contains, and they certainly had no adequate preconception of the outcome of their labors. We have a longer

past to contemplate than they, a broader present vision. Shall we do less?

So, from a morose and morbid sense of the mystery of things, from an almost abnormally intense realization of the awfulness and inexorableness of fatality, Maeterlinck has traveled an upward road, into the realm of a high spiritual conception of life. He has given the world one undeniable masterpiece in the book on the Bee, one volume full of the noblest ethical teaching, in *La Sagesse et la Destinée* one play of genuine dramatic power and superior psychology in *Monna Vanna*, and a number of smaller works, gems of purest ray serene, that make for beauty and for righteousness. John Morley tells us the French philosophers have uniformly declined to rest on an incompleted interpretation of experience, that they are prone to insist upon a too hasty synthesis. If this be true, Maeterlinck is rather un-French in his fondness for those problems which are probably insoluble. His message is "Prepare for further revelations, learn to wait."

French literature has often been enriched by accretions from Switzerland and Belgium, and France is to be congratulated that her smaller neighbors thus add lustre to her fame and variety to her thought. It would appear, in recent times at least, that no writer of either of these countries has added so much as Maeterlinck to the literature consigned to expression in the French tongue.

MSH # 22412

END OF
TITLE